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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how a set of curriculum reforms in the United States and England over the past 20 years may be interrelated, according to conclusions drawn from ethnographic investigation and informed by historical reflections. The discussion centers upon the case of informal, open, or progressive education, which has enjoyed a 40 plus--year practice in English primary and middle schools but which appeared as a short-lived movement in the United States in the 1960s and early 1970s. The United States and England have influenced each other for some time, but the fact that similar kinds of curriculum development emerged in both settings may be more indicative of related responses to social and political issues than to distinctive borrowing from each other. In both England and the United States, informal or progressive approaches to primary teaching have been influenced by increased concern for developing children's basic skills, testing their competency and achievement, and stressing professional accountability to the public. Both English and American school practices suggest an ideological flavor to decision-making. In both countries the norm has continued to be more formal primary schools with drill, practice, and testing as common characteristics. A figure illustrates some of the data. A list of 40 references is included. (BJV)

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CURRICULUM REFORM, COMPARATIVE EDUCATION, AND ETHNOGRAPHY: A PERSPECTIVE ON PENDULUM SWINGS

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Education has long been described as a field plagued by fads in professional thought or, more objectively stated, by movements with regard to the best ways to educate children. These movements have often led us first to one view and then another, only to return to the first with few modifications--a phenomenon compared frequently to the swings of a pendulum.

Many would argue that educational practice in the United States has been particularly prone to such events. Part of the tradition of curriculum reform movements has included the examination of educational practices in other countries from which we have obtained inspiration, challenge, and specific approaches. In the late 1960s we looked to England for direction in primary education, only to turn to other concerns a few years later. The English to whom we looked proceeded with their work in nurturing primary education but are currently examining our emphases on minimum competency testing, basic skills development, and accountability.

While curriculum reform movements may at first seem independent, numerous threads seem to tie them together in what may be unpredicted ways. A cross-cultural perspective makes their development seem even more intriguing. This paper explores how one set of curriculum reforms

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in two countries over the past 20 years may interrelate based upon conclusions drawn from ethnographic investigation and informed by historical reflections. The discussion centers upon the case of informal, open, or progressive education, seen in its social context, which has enjoyed a 40+-year practice in English primary and middle schools but which appeared as a short-lived movement in the United States in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The discussion also broadens to examine how the evolution of this approach to teaching may have been influenced in the United States by the accountability, basic skills, and minimum competency testing movements which have not as yet affected the English educational experience but which are likely to do so in the near future.

The intent here is not to provide a complete account of the ethnographic work underlying the discussion nor to offer a thorough analysis of policy-making in either the United States or England. Rather, it will offer some perspectives on how curriculum change seems to have developed in both countries and to suggest how such events might be interrelated. What will be outlined are several propositions which themselves deserve further analysis in future work. While there are serious pitfalls in such efforts, such as the dangers of both overgeneralization and glibness, attempts to identify trends and interrelationships seem justified if they can lead to informed discussion, serious questioning, and deeper study.

If one can gain perspective on the interrelationships among these curriculum movements as they have developed in two national settings, increased insight might be possible with regard to the role of the social

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and political milieu in fostering particular approaches to teaching children and even perhaps in directing educational change. With such insight, educators might be in a better position to develop their practice in keeping with both the range of contexts in which they function and the evolving research, experiential, and theoretical bases of the field. Not only would practice likely evolve in a more consistent and well-founded fashion, but the educational needs of children would likely be better served.

American Curriculum Developments in Primary Education and English School Practices

In the late 1960s educators in the United States became enamored of English approaches to primary education which were labeled as "informal" or "open." Journalistic reports (Featherstone, 1971; Silberman, 1970) and descriptive accounts by American educators (Fisher, 1972; Rogers, 1970) visiting English schools were greeted with enthusiasm in the United States when they first were published. It appeared to many that the English primary practices suggested an avenue for providing more equal educational opportunity to all students in our elementary public schools, an issue of paramount social concern in the late 1960s. The quality of learning observed with all children in the English schools visited indicated to many American educators that a change in perspective or philosophy, followed by concomitant developments in curricular emphases and in methodology, might assist schools in achieving their perceived mission of expanding access to the "American dream" and creating a "great society."

Based upon their own visits to a variety of English state-supported primary schools, many American educators embarked on efforts to adopt these practices, which cumulatively came to be known as the "open education movement." The acknowledgement of having borrowed practices from abroad was underscored in educational discussions which declared that these were based on the "British Infant School" approach to teaching, an American label unknown in the United Kingdom. However, in a very few years, the educational community had apparently determined that open education was not "successful" enough to be continued and was being replaced both in the literature and in the classroom with concerns for "returning to basic skills" and adhering to accountability.

While exploring in detail the causes for such shifts in attitude and curriculum emphases are beyond the scope of this discussion, it may be useful to note several possible explanations. Ethnographic study over a period of several years (Scheirer, 1983) reveals that there has been a lack of understanding of the nature of informal-open education. The visits of American educators to English schools were seldom long enough with sufficient opportunity for reflection to support the informed analysis necessary for appropriate adaptation of practices during their implementation across cultures.

Decisions to abandon the more informal American programs were also based upon confused research paradigms with consequent confused research results and a lack of clearly defined constructs delimiting open education (Ellsworth, 1979; Giaconia & Hedges, 1982; Horwitz, 1979; Marshall, H. H., 1981). In addition, a more conservative social-political mood in the mid-1970s supported by economic stresses contributed to

the climate in which open education was evaluated and replaced by other curriculum and teaching approaches.

Suffice it to say, the curricular emphases in American primary education in the late 1960s and early 1970s assumed the form of a passionate, short-lived bandwagon phenomenon. English observations confirm this assessment. Marriott (1985) notes that American writers visited progressive primary schools in England and wrote about them

> with the explicit intention of persuading American educators of the viability of such practices. . . . Silberman's (1970) book, which sold more than 340,000 copies by 1973, and is reputed to have made a great impact on teachers in America, . . . portrays schools largely in terms of a series of examples . . . which extol the virtues of progressive methods. (p. 33)

Alexander (1984) offers a much more incisive assessment:

> During the late 1960s and early 1970s, . . . the American penchant for uncritical acclaim of English traditions reached new heights. Planeloads of professors and teachers, the latter in pursuit--in between the Tower of London and Anne Hathaway's cottage--of easy credits for master's degrees and doctorates, descended on primary schools in certain parts of England, chiefly Oxfordshire, Leicestershire, the former West Riding of Yorkshire and London. (One Oxfordshire primary head finally called a halt when he arrived at his school one morning to find a coachload of US teachers waiting, direct from Heathrow and uninvited.) 'Open education' became a growth industry, and American writers like Featherstone, Silberman and Rogers provided an adulatory commentary on primary education. (pp. 9-10)

Analyses following this bandwagon period which examined what English and American educators have been trying to achieve support the need for careful observation of methods, consideration of philosophy and historical and social traditions, and sensitivity to appropriate adaptation if more informal or progressive approaches to primary education are to be successful (Doll, 1983; Hunter & Scheirer, in press; Noddings & Enright, 1983; Scheirer, 1983).

Any study of curriculum decision-making on scales larger than specific local cases leads naturally to a question of who is making the decisions. Since there is no national system of American education, the response here is at best amorphous. Clearly, discussion in the professional literature and in the popular press influences the directions we educators purport to follow. In the case of the basic skills, accountability, and minimum competency testing movements, state legislatures and local school boards have exerted enormous direct impact, though it can be argued that the media have often instigated their decision-making. The commonality of decisions across the states is also remarkable, which implies more similarity in approach than 50 separate systems would indicate. This conundrum regarding the genesis of curriculum decision-making in the American scene at least suggests that concerns in the social and political milieu provide the context in which official decision-makers--both legislative and professional--behave. The role of the social and political context is at least as important in England, but the role of government is somewhat more unified since a national education system does exist.

English Curriculum Developments in Primary Education

The English experience with informal, progressive education has been somewhat different than the American, based on a different history with regard to the development of primary teaching practices and a different cultural milieu. Describing the nature of such practices and their relationship to the social context has been the purpose for one long-term ethnographic study of this approach to schooling in one particular setting, with a view to extrapolating principles of potential use in implementing informal, open, or progressive education elsewhere (Scheirer, 1983). While the study's analyses and interpretations have clarified the concept of informal, open, or progressive education and the conditions which support its development in a given school, of more interest in this discussion are the larger questions which it has raised about the social and political environment which gives rise to such teaching in varied settings and nurtures its growth. Thus, ethnographic inquiry has served to develop a data base for the subsequent discussion, informed by historical material and pertinent literature.

Informal, open, or progressive primary education in England has enjoyed a long tradition of support for certain child-centered, developmentally based teaching approaches. Blenkin and Kelly (1987) argue that this long tradition has in theory, if not in practice, been associated with a progressive ideology and an innovative style. In addition, such an interpretation of primary education has reflected much of the democratic ideal sought for in state-supported schooling.

Central government sanction of informal, progressive primary teaching practices has characterized the English experience in the form

of a series of reports beginning notably with Hadow in 1931 (cited in Richards, 1984), continuing dramatically with Plowden in 1967 (Central Advisory Council for Education, 1967), and still evident in the more conservative statements of the 1970s and 1980s (e.g., Department of Education and Science [DES], 1975, 1978, 1980, 1982, 1985a, 1985b, 1986). This teaching approach has also evolved based upon a long history of reflection on practice, as demonstrated in the stories of Tanner (1981), Stone (DES, 1949), and Marshall (Marshall, S., 1963) and in the talks of Schiller (Griffin-Beale, 1979). These practitioners influenced others to reflect on their own teaching, a process slowly creating a climate of shared assumptions and beliefs about children's learning present in many areas of England.

The Plowden Report could be considered a modern watershed of thought in English primary education. Marriott (1985) suggests that it was part of the political mood of the 1960s which saw education as having desirable social and economic consequences. Post-Plowden analysis and critique have endeavored to place in perspective the practices which it advocated and the extent to which those practices were actually carried out. Marriott's analysis of the actual data indicates that, rather than being the norm in most areas of England, progressive practices were clearly evident in only about one-third of the schools. He describes how writers who interpreted and extended Plowden's recommendations implied that widespread change was occurring, thus creating a perception reinforced by the American reactions mentioned earlier.

Alexander (1984) notes that Plowden was an inspirational document, legitimizing the progressive views of many teachers. He then counters

with an analysis that much of this primary teaching tradition was ideological in nature, based upon myths, false dichotomies, and caricature. Both the Primary Education in England: A Survey by HM Inspectors of Schools (DES, 1978) and the "ORACLE" (Observation Research and Classroom Learning Evaluation) research data (Galton, Simon, & Croll, 1980) substantiate that most primary and middle schools in England were not demonstrating progressive practices, calling seriously into question the extent to which the progressive primary tradition had spread throughout English schools.

The fact that the education profession itself overstated the extent of progressive teaching practices in primary classrooms may be connected to the perceptions held by the general public. Along with the optimism and excitement engendered by the support for the progressive approaches came measured critique (e.g., Dearden, 1976; Peters, 1969) and strident opposition. Hyland (1979) describes the latter's Black Papers as going beyond criticism and attacking the fundamental tenets of progressivism; "the permissiveness and egalitarianism of progressivism was [sic] said to be at the root of our educational problems, and calls were made for a return to disciplined classrooms and basic minimum standards" (p. 36). Fueled by economic stresses, research which indicated no clear-cut answers to educational problems (e.g., Bennett et al., 1980; Galton, Simon, & Croll, 1980), and popular press reports of what came to be known as the "William Tyndale Affair," there emerged a belief that the more innovative approaches were linked not only to a decline in educational standards but also to social unrest, violence and crime, and the break up of the family (Marriott, 1985).

Whatever the precise sequence of events, Marriott (1985) cites harsher economic circumstances, a possible reorientation toward neo-idealist views of education, more directive and conservative ideas in government's approach to education, and a decline in the number of primary children as characteristic of the current scene in English primary education. Within this context, doubt has emerged about the ability of schools to foster social mobility or equalize educational opportunity.

Of particular significance at the present time is central government's increasing interest in identifying curriculum guidelines, manifested in ever clearer form by official documents as they are published (e.g., DES, 1985a, 1985b, 1986; Baker, 1987). While professional discussion and debate have occurred with the government, educators' fears about the final nature of a required national core curriculum, a national policy for assessing academic performance, and plans for government monitoring of professional performance color life at all levels of schooling. While the "jury is still out" on the specific outcomes from these consuming issues, there seems to be no question that the educational scene has become more conservative with more government involvement inevitable.

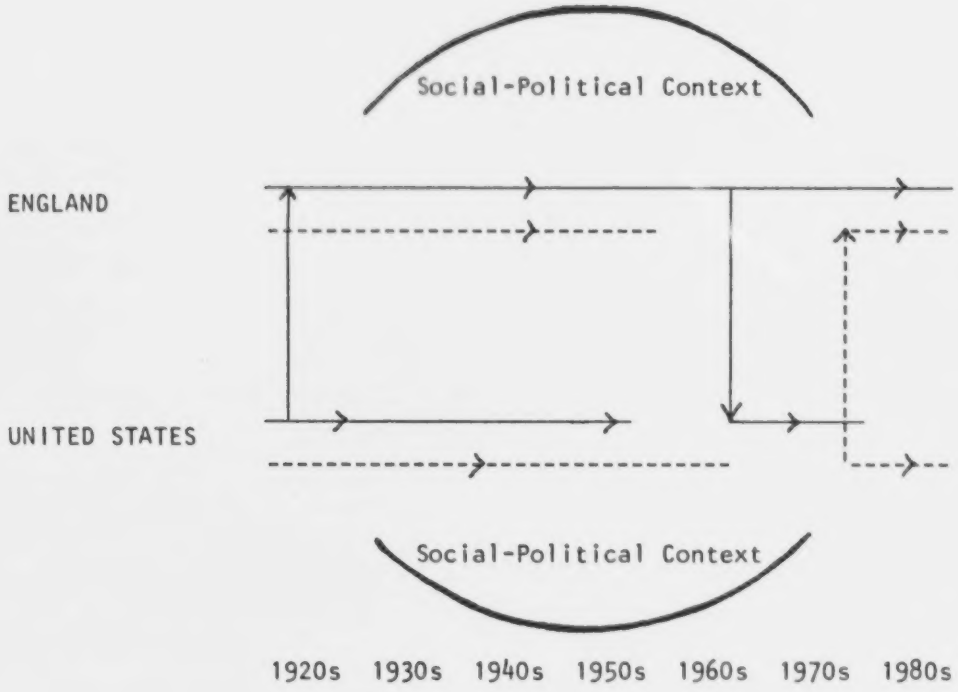
Interrelationships

Any attempt to identify interrelationships among curriculum efforts in two different countries draws upon perspectives used in comparative education. Traditionally, comparative educational study has enabled the consideration of alternative solutions to problems similar to one's

own; it has permitted educators to learn from the experiences of others so that the quality of schooling can improve unimpeded and has allowed the researcher to explore and test theoretical propositions about teaching and learning within an international frame of reference (Trethewey, 1976). Comparative education can also provide an opportunity to acquire insight into one's own educational system through the analysis of contrasts and similarities within an international setting and thereby to develop more fully and more critically one's own ideas and practices (Nicholas, 1980; Scheirer, 1983).

Further, as interrelationships are identified, what Johnson (1974) calls international homogenization in education becomes increasingly evident. Discrete approaches upon which many comparisons have been made in the past are ironically more difficult to find as connections across national boundaries are recognized and nurtured. Coupled with technological advances in communications and international interdependence in politics and economics, this homogenization is likely to increase substantially in the future.

Clearly, as Figure 1 on page 12 demonstrates, influence between the United States and England has occurred for some time so that one could argue that both countries may be cut from highly similar cultural cloth. That similar curriculum developments emerge in both settings may be more indicative of related responses to similar social and political issues rather than distinctive borrowings from each other. Barth's (1972) outline of a set of 29 assumptions regarding the nature of open education and children's learning, derived from both English and American sources,



———— Curriculum developments related to informal, open, or progressive teaching practices

---------- Curriculum developments related to basic skills, testing, and accountability movements

Figure 1. Tracing Some Curriculum Developments in Primary Education between England and the United States

demonstrates the similarity at least of perceptions held by educators in the two countries.

Yet, since these are two distinct nations with differences in social and educational traditions, there is also the argument that curriculum patterns reflect national concerns overlaid with influences from the other as similar social and political pressures emerge. Nicholas (1980) offers a description of English characteristics within the international setting:

> The UK primary school appears to have pressed further ahead than any other country, even the USA and Scandinavia . . . with 'progressive' classroom practices. This is exemplified in a number of ways--e.g. the informal methods used to teach children basic skills. Such aims are normally achieved elsewhere by more traditional direct, didactic teaching. Again, the UK primary school curriculum tends to be much more extended in terms of content than abroad. . . . Similarly, comparatively speaking, we are unorthodox in our use of time and space and the way we group children for learning purposes. Whilst some English critics have tried to call a halt to these developments and urged a 'return to basics', many foreign experts, notably the Americans, (e.g. Silberman 1973), have urged that their countries follow in our steps. (p. 154)

As a result, a case for influence across different systems of education seems legitimate.

That educators in both countries have clearly acknowledged the influence on professional practices from the other country provides

further evidence of differences between the two. In addition to the quite blatant American borrowing of informal, progressive approaches to teaching in English primary schools, the English have recognized the influence of John Dewey on their conceptualization of these approaches (Blenkin & Kelly, 1987). Another example of English attention to the American scene is provided by Blenkin's (1980) analysis of early curriculum development styles which relied heavily on American models. The latter's emphasis on instrumental demands and a scientific, comprehensive approach to curriculum planning has markedly influenced English thinking in curriculum design and, one might argue, could even be connected to current government efforts to establish a national curriculum.

Figure 1 portrays the influence which has proceeded both ways between England and the United States. We each seem aware of our own borrowing. However, American literature has rarely acknowledged the influence of American practices on English developments, while the English literature discussed thus far seems keenly aware of the effect English progressive primary teaching has had on the American experience. Even the Plowden Report (Central Advisory Council for Education, 1967) acknowledged in its introduction that English primary education had already developed a high reputation worldwide for certain approaches to teaching. To the extent that curriculum decisions may affect developments elsewhere, some might see as desirable a time when curriculum efforts acknowledge effects beyond simple national boundaries.

A second observation from Figure 1 centers on the interaction between the two highlighted themes of curriculum developments in informal, open,

or progressive teaching practices and those related to movements emphasizing basic skills, testing, and accountability. In both England and the United States informal or progressive approaches to primary teaching have been influenced by increased concern for developing children's basic skills, testing their competencies and achievement, and stressing professional accountability to the public. There have also been periods of reaction to emphasis on academic learnings, especially when issues of social mobility and equal educational opportunity were publicly stressed, notably in the 1960s and less obviously in the 1930s. While these events may be explained more completely by changing conditions in the social and political context, the pendulum swings between the two themes in curriculum development are nonetheless evident.

A third proposition suggested by this review of English and American school practices is the role played by ideology in curriculum decision-making. Alexander's (1984) analysis of the shared assumptions regarding practice among primary teachers in England in terms of child-centeredness suggests an ideological flavor to decision-making. This approach is not unlike what Myers and Duke (1977) observe having happened with open education in the United States; they see the label as representing little more than a collection of "'best existing practices'. . . imbued . . . with the aura of an ideology" (p. 227).

Hyland's (1979) examination of open education as a slogan asserts that the label was adopted in England during the mid-1970s in order to invigorate their progressive ideas.

Thus, we have educational trends turning full circle in both Britain and America with clear connections between the cycles of development

> in both countries. Just as American educators turned to British primary school practice for inspiration during the formalist backlash of the 1960s so British progressives are seeking to utilise the established slogans of the American open education movement at a time when their values and ideas are under attack. Though the major influence of the American ideas will probably remain at the slogan level being used to validate and bolster up already established procedures, it is undeniable that educators throughout the world have come to recognise the significance and value of openness as an educational idea. (p. 37)

Thus, ideologies and slogans have been developed and exchanged along with theories and practices.

Finally, an examination of the trends suggested in Figure 1 may indicate that each country has its dominant theme which plays off of the secondary theme. That is, while shifts may occur within each setting, a certain continuity or character emerges. In England, informal or progressive education has been essentially a singular and consistent tradition at the primary level, even though it has not been adopted universally in practice. The concerns for basic skills, testing, and accountability in the primary sectors have surfaced only recently, connecting perhaps to testing traditions in the secondary level but having little relationship to the primary practices of the last 50 years. In the United States, the more progressive or project-oriented approaches in some schools were replaced in the mid-1950s by highly academic programs in response to the Sputnik influence, which in turn were supplanted with open education in the mid-1960s through the early 1970s. However, in both

the progressive and open education periods, the norm continued to be more formal primary schools with drill, practice, and testing as common characteristics.

The primary education traditions in both countries appear to be different but with influences from each other modifying their practices. Doll (1983) notes that the progressive education movement in the United States modified and humanized the associationist view of education held by most people even though the essential model did not change; through acknowledging developmentalism it softened the effects of the behavioral approaches. Similarly, Blenkin and Kelly (1987) argue that the child development movement represented so strongly in English primary education has influenced the nature of the progressive movement and more recently the direction of the accountability movement. While this modifying influence of one viewpoint on the other may explain past curriculum development events, its effect on current or future curriculum efforts remains to be seen.

A Beginning

This paper has offered a set of generalizations about the relationships which have occurred among various curriculum movements in England and the United States. The paper has also stressed how these movements might relate to the social and political milieu whose components are becoming more and more international in character. The perspective suggested for analyzing the interrelationships among certain curricular decisions in two countries draws upon traditions in comparative education enlightened by ethnographic inquiry and historical analysis. While it is indeed tentative, this perspective may provide direction for increased

understanding of how a variety of curricular decisions seems to occur within an increasingly tightly woven international context.

Such an integrative discussion presents considerable methodological challenges. Clearly, more effort is necessary in analyzing the contributions to cross-cultural policy analysis from the fields of comparative education and the history of education. Further, the questions of whether and how ethnographic data should inform such comparative analyses need to be addressed both if the ethnographic research paradigm is to remain valid and if it is to lead to powerful descriptions and explanations.

However, the integration of approaches from several areas of educational inquiry may begin the process of creating a fresh and close analysis in order to shed light on the interrelationships among social contexts, curriculum decisions, and curriculum movements. Set internationally, this process may also provide insight regarding the conditions necessary for certain approaches to teaching to develop and prosper and the role of educators in making professional decisions about what is best for children's learning.

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